

"Amid water crisis, small community takes matters into its own hands" by Christina Giardinelli, Wednesday, July 28th 2021

<https://ktvl.com/news/local/amid-water-crisis-small-community-takes-matters-into-its-own-hands>

Last accessed March 23, 2022.

Hornbrook — As the state of California recons with severe drought conditions, a small town on its northernmost border is no stranger to water rationing and conservation.

Hornbrook has been dealing with water issues for years now but residents say the drought is not to blame.

"When I moved in here seven years ago the realtor warned us, he said 'to be honest they are having a terrible problem with the water,'" said Hornbrook resident Dennis Ryan. He said he was told that he "may or may not have water" and that it wasn't due to a lack of water but rather because of issues with the water district's board that had failed to manage finances appropriately and take care of necessary infrastructure maintenance.

"A lot of turmoil going on in that board we ended up voting that board out and they left the water system in shambles," he explained.

Hornbrook is an unincorporated town in Siskiyou County. It has about 250 residents and is about 15 miles north of Yreka.

Because the community has no governing body, two board of directors manage a fire and a water district. The water district's board is currently engaged in litigation with two former members who filed a lawsuit over the manner in which they were dismissed.

Residents were left to pick up those shambles yesterday after a pipe started to leak under Hornbrook Community park. Residents say a neighbor who was walking her dog in the area first noticed it and called in the community.

"I rode over here on my quad real quick to see what was going on and as I was pulling up other people start showing up, there was a bunch of tools that showed up, we were all shoveling here," said Hornbrook resident, Anthony Johnson indicating a large hole in the ground that he helped dig out yesterday.

He said residents initially used shovels to look for the leak and later were able to get help from an excavator that a rancher brought over. Johnson explained that some of the individuals who helped dig were contractors and knew what they were doing. Residents discovered a pipe with a two to three-inch hole and replaced it.

"I just couldn't believe...it gives me goosebumps thinking about it...how the town came together and everybody was out here pitching in," he said.

Residents said they even ended up having to cut down a tree that was covering the leak, they think it's possible that the roots were the culprit.

"None of us like to cut trees down but the tree had to go and once they got down to the bottom we saw where the hole was, all the water was coming out," Johnson said.

Residents said they did all of the work without help and without consulting the county or the district's current water board. Their water levels had been diminishing at a rapid rate for weeks until finally a few weeks ago all residents in the district were completely without water.

One resident, Sharrel Barnes, said during a phone interview that the situation was particularly difficult for her because she uses an oxygen tank and is unable to go out and pick up water. She said for the last two days she hasn't even been able to flush her toilette.

Though it's a dire situation for many, community members say Hornbrook is the type of place where neighbors help each other pull through.

Janet St. Germain and her husband have been trucking water, granted by Yreka's emergency services, into the town and giving it out for free. The couple owns a water truck that they use to deliver potable water to fire camps.

St Germain said so far they have made 6 trips to Yreka and back to fill up the truck which they have parked in front of their home as a station for the community to fill up at.

"They (residents) are going through it they are really taking advantage of it and we have gotten so many thank you's for just doing this," she said. "It's what we do our little town sticks together pretty well."

The board's president, Robert Pickett said they are dealing with a whole slew of issues, ranging from infrastructure damaged during the 2018 deadly Klamathon fire to aging pipes, litigation and a state-wide drought.

He said when the district noticed that water reserves were getting low a few weeks ago they began rationing the water to 200 gallons per household per week. Shortly after that they detected contamination and instated a water boil advisory. He blamed the water shut off on a few individuals he said are using more than their fair share of water.

"We have some heavy users, one household...150,000 gallons a month. That is too much water," he said.

He noted that the leak may have had something to do with all of the water draining from the district's reserve prompting the total shutoff.

Since residents have patched up the leak the water is now back on and the community reported the pressure is running smoothly.

When asked whether residents would be getting a refund for the money they were paying for water they weren't receiving, Pickett said, "I highly doubt it." He said the district simply does not have the funds, it has to pay attorneys engaged in the lawsuit. He said it also has a \$1,600 electric bill associated with the three wells it operates and pays a bookkeeper. Board members are in volunteer positions.

He said the board has applied for a number of grants from the state to repair the infrastructure but those were held up in a lengthy bureaucratic process because the state needed to make sure that the funds would not go towards attorney fees.

Pickett said one of those grants for \$800,000 is now "practically a done deal." He said those funds will go into repairing two wells that were damaged in the fire. The state is also involved in installing filtration to fix the water contamination problem but Pickett said it could be years before the community is able to see the results of those projects.

In the meantime, he advised residents to pay attention to their water use and if they believe the meter reading is wrong he advised notifying the district because there could be a leak.

When asked, he said the district did not participate in finding and fixing the leak that was discovered at the Community Park yesterday.

"It's their water system it's their water and they want it so they came out and they were glad to help to get it fixed," he said.